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# Pursuing the American Dream. White Ethnics and the New Populism

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# Book Reviews

*Pursuing the American Dream. White Ethnics and the New Populism,* b
Richard Krickus. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1976. pp. 424. $3.95.

White ethnicity seems to have caught on as a subject of serious writing Richard Krickus's *Pursuing the American Dream*—like Michael Novak' *The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics*, and Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*— reflects the growing attention of sociologists and historians toward the immi grant experience of those millions of Americans neither WASP nor blac who have occupied so uneasy a place in the liberal perspective. Indeed, th genesis for the Krickus book was the ignorance about working-class Ameri cans, specifically those of southern and eastern European descent, which h encountered among the presumably enlightened Washington bureaucracy o the Johnson Administration. Himself descended from the second wave o European immigration—after the Irish and Germans, and after 1880— Krickus attempts to correct the view prevalent in liberal circles since the mid sixties that working-class Americans represent at best Archie Bunkers—sim ple-minded if harmless in their support of the war and their opposition to re form—and at worst northern, hardhatted versions of rednecks. Krickus argues that a myopic folly led such liberals, notably those responsible for the McGovern campaign, to calculate that, like the rednecks, working-class ethnics were no longer essential to Democratic presidential aspirations. He scarcely hides his scorn for the "Cosmopolitan-Left" who felt that their party could and should at last purge itself of the embarrassing ethnic remnant of an older, dirtier, but now happily expendable politics.

Krickus pretty evenly divides his attention between the unfairness of the way white ethnics have been viewed and treated, and the mistake of exclud ing them from a key role in the national Democratic Party. He describes those main ingredients which have produced dominant white ethnic attitudes toward American society and politics. From their first arrival from Russia, Italy, or Poland, the ethnics experienced the scorn and exploitation of the al ready-established nativists. The pressure for Americanization, which grew strident during World War I, produced a feeling of displacement among first- and second-generation ethnics: a self-consciousness about their origins coupled with a guilty pride in a heritage they could not easily cast off. Krickus suggests that liberal scorn for ethnic loyalty to the political machines ignores the historical reality of an America in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century hostile to the newly-arrived immigrants, where usually the only source of reliable information and aid was the local party hack, whose friendliness and concern understandably commanded the newcomer's loyalty at election time. Where socialists and other radicals proved too dreamy or in tellectual for the poor working immigrant, and where basic social services

were thin or nonexistent, the Democratic ward heelers attended to those needs essential to the immigrant's survival and comfort in a land of strangers. And, because it has always been easier for the ethnic to break into the political machine than into the private clubs, the universities, and the professions dominated by WASPs, the local party ladder has remained an attractive means for attaining status.

As for national politics, the second generation of European immigrants went unnoticed until Al Smith and F. D. R. Smith's defeat, while attributable to exploitation of nativist prejudice, marked the last time a party could capture the presidency while ignoring the ethnics. And yet, while Roosevelt was the first national Democratic figure to seize upon the political potential of the ethnics, according to Krickus almost the only other Democrat to give them equal recognition has been George Wallace, whose pitch to the workingman in 1968 and 1972 spoke to their sense of having been increasingly neglected by the same national Democratic Party which they and their parents had helped make dominant. Rather than attributing their defection to Wallace and Nixon to simple racism, it would be well, Krickus suggests, to note the decay of urban life familiar to most ethnics but unknown to most of their liberal critics, the disproportionate price paid by the working class for the wars against poverty and North Vietnam, the intolerance shown them by the McGovernites before and after the 1972 convention, and the elaborate ethnic strategy of Richard Nixon—factors virtually guaranteeing their switch to Wallace in the primaries and Nixon in November. Having noted the error of relating political attitudes solely to social class and thus ignoring ethnicity as a political determinant, Krickus insists that racial tensions reflect more complex and pervasive problems in American society than racism alone.

Such an account of recent American history is a welcome counter to more orthodox versions. If Krickus's reference to "working men" or "working class" as a synonym for white ethnics is occasionally confusing—as he sometimes includes the Irish but frequently does not—and if he displays a puzzling selectivity in the ethnic stereotypes he chooses to dispel—for example, he makes no comment on the Mafia, probably the source of most slurs against Italian-Americans—nevertheless his plea for greater understanding of the ethnic viewpoint is provocative and generally convincing.

Krickus offers two essays, represented by the terms of his subtitle and connected by an appeal to political pragmatism. Unfortunately the latter of these two seems not so well detailed or thoughtfully argued as the first. Having criticized the big interests in America which control our lives, Krickus seems content to propose alternative biggies—a nationalized oil industry, publicly owned "enterprises" to compete with private corporations, and more powerful labor unions—without suggesting how the inherent difficulties of bigness in so complex a society as ours are to be overcome. While his preference for the term "populism" over "socialism," which he sees as rhetorically ineffective in American politics, is valid, merely changing the name will not answer objections to such a scheme. By the end of the book, the bond of political practicality by which he seeks to connect the white

ethnics with the new populism has snapped. While Krickus sees the white ethnics in much fairer and more realistic terms than did the McGovernites, his proposals, at least as stated here, seem no less fuzzy and no less doomed to rejection by the masses than theirs. Fortunately, though, no thoughtful reader need accept those proposals to benefit from his able articulation of the white ethnics' frustrations.

——**Bruce K. Martin**
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*Black Bondage in the North,* by Edgar J. McManus. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973.

Much of the recent reexamination of the slave system has focused upon the southern states. Professor McManus gives us a broad study of the institution in its northern setting. Since the author sees his work as a pioneer effort, his aim is simply to provide data, and to avoid extended analysis and comment. Nevertheless, he does have a point of view which is in part that the general characteristics of slavery are the same everywhere; thus he disagrees with Frank Tannenbaum in *Slave and Citizen* and Stanley Elkins in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life.*

A second important characteristic of McManus's approach is his emphasis on the economic aspect. The treatment of slaves anywhere in the North, and by extension anywhere in the American hemisphere, is determined by the type of work done by the slave; the more economically sophisticated and skilled the slave, the more important he is to the master and the better he is treated, within the confines of the slave system. The author also stresses the importance of slave labor to the economic growth of the North, and he records numerous pleas for black labor from all the area's colonies. Of course he recognizes the effect of religious views on behavior, and also that slave codes and laws differ from one colony to another depending on the proportion of blacks to the total population, but the economic argument is central.

McManus also discerns a general tendency for New England to follow one pattern and the middle colonies another, and an urban-rural dichotomy; the treatment and opportunities of blacks in urban areas are much the same in all the northern colonies. Indeed, McManus sees much the same pattern in the North as does Richard Wade (*Slavery in the Cities*) in the South.

Blacks in the North endured what McManus calls "A Different Bondage." In particular, skilled blacks increasingly found themselves forced out of their occupations by whites, and since there were no white masters to profit from such skilled black labor, few whites protested this exclusion. The consequences were enormous, for as McManus cogently observes, "the bitter paradox of emancipation in the North is that it excluded blacks from the eco-